

III.

THE GREAT DOLMEN OF SAUMUR.

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France is a country which has long been known to be rich in dolmens. Fergusson, in his *Rude Stone Monuments*, has pointed out that that class of monument is to be found chiefly on the western side of the country. If a line be drawn from the Mediterranean through Nimes and the Auvergne, and sloping westwards to Bretagne, nearly all the dolmens will be found lying to the west of it. On the east of this line circles and barrows are the common form of sepulchral monument. To the west it is the dolmen. This may point to a difference of race among the prehistoric inhabitants.

The dolmen is very common in the land of Moab, where, on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, they are to be met with in great numbers, as Professor George Adam Smith tells me. They do not occur in Palestine proper. But they are numerous along the north of Africa, and are specially abundant in Algeria. They occur on the west side of Spain, in Cornwall, Wales, the Isle of Man, and a very few on the west side of Scotland.

In France upwards of 3400 dolmens are known, and these are, as a rule, larger, sometimes very much larger, than those to be found in our country. The one to which I would call attention is enormous, the largest in Europe, and, with the doubtful exception of one in Algeria, probably the largest in the world. It is situated near Saumur, a town on the south side of the lower Loire. The dolmen lies about two kilometres to the south of the town, by the roadside, and close to the village of Bagneux. The proportions of the erection are surprising. It is 65 feet in length, nearly 24 feet in width, and 15 in height.

The whole structure, of which a view from the south-east is shown in

fig. 1, consists of fifteen stones : four compose each side, one closes in the back, one partially closes the entrance, four form the roof, and one in the interior supports the largest of these roof stones, which is split. The stones forming the roof differ in size : the largest is upwards of



Fig. 1. The Great Dolmen of Saumur, from the south-east.

24 feet in length and 22 feet 9 inches in width, and nearly 3 feet in thickness.

In the year 1775 an excavation was made by an officer of the name of Dolmieu, when it was ascertained that the stones were sunk in the ground to a depth of 3 metres (9 feet 9). No human remains or instruments of any sort have been found in or around the dolmen.

Outside the dolmen stands one stone (as shown in fig. 2), and another lies flat on the ground. The last has fallen down within recent years, and the guardian of the monument informed me that formerly the construction extended out much further, and that when the road was



Fig. 2. The Great Dolmen of Saumur, north end.

being made the end was demolished and the stones broken up for road metal. In short, there existed, what is to be found elsewhere, a passage leading up to the dolmen. The popular explanation of the vast erection is that it was used as a college for the priests of the religion of the time, whatever that was, and this idea is supposed to be confirmed by the absence of sepulchral remains. The entire structure



Fig. 3. The smaller Dolmen, Saumur.

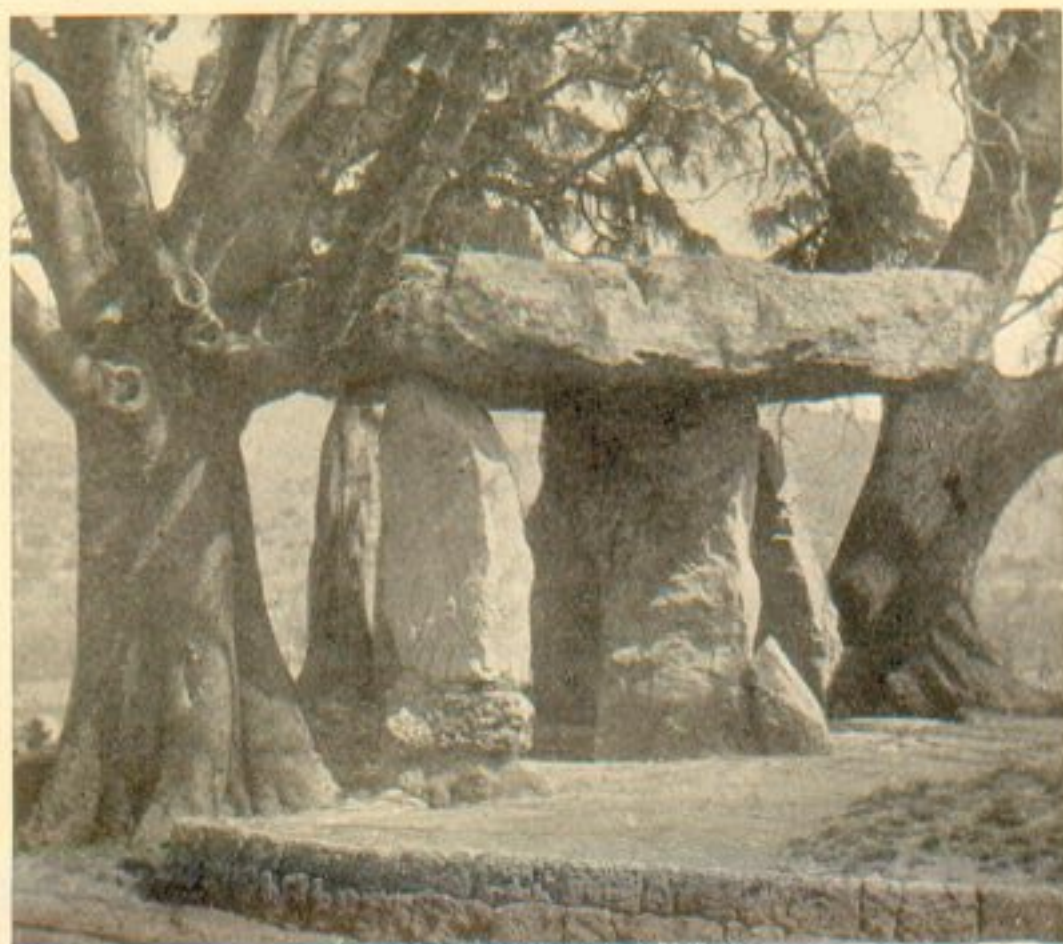


Fig. 4. Dolmen at Draguignan.

consists of gigantic blocks of rough sandstone, nearly all about the same size. It is said that the material does not belong to the district, and that the nearest point where such stone is to be found is Bretagne. In any case it is a problem how the stones were conveyed to the spot where they have been set up. Assuredly these prehistoric races, like the ancient Egyptians, had a knowledge of mechanics we do not give them credit for. A short distance, about a thousand yards to the west of the great dolmen, is another of smaller dimensions, but yet of very considerable size. A view of it is given in fig. 3.

I have said that on the east side of France dolmens are rare. In Provence, Fergusson, in his enumeration of French dolmens, makes note of none. But I have visited one, the only one in Provence, at Draguignan, the chief town of the Department of the Var. It lies a little outside the town to the north. There are in it four upright stones, which are over 8 feet in height, with a very fine table on the top, as shown in fig. 4. This dolmen is of special interest, as being the most easterly one in France.